Richard Hughes

Anthea Hamilton: *Sorry I'm Late*
Firstsite, Colchester
8 September – 25 November

Anthea Hamilton, like many artists of her generation, is interested in the evolution and nature of negotiating what Michel de Certeau called the 'panoply of codes' – the social and environmental factors that collectively inform the contemporary experience. As the exhibition title and Hamilton's referentially direct approach here imply, she is mindful of being late to, and therefore a perennial borrower from, the table of history. With this series of installations, Hamilton appears to have drawn freely and with humour from the visual and theoretical territories that meet during moments of everyday interaction or performative acts, but always with one eye on the conditions of the encounter and the expectations of those implicated within it.

The first work, *John Travolta Yogic Screen Saver and Clock (London, Paris, Tokyo, New York, Milan)*(all works 2012) - a line of four monitors strapped to a monumental scaffolding rig in the entrance space – sets the scene but doesn't prepare one for Hamilton's material gameplay with imagery, perishables and objects. It's a stark and brave opener, given the scale of construction used to transmit a very simple idea, but one that in the synced screensaver flip of a disco-era Travolta from one monitor to another connects the artist with her art and performance heritage: from Joan Jonas to *The Office*, via Monty Python. The incongruity of giant images of Travolta's head – pasted onto the curve of the building as if to ape his *Saturday Night Fever* street strut, and interrupted by windows and other architectural details – brings to mind the ludicrous fruit-machine object–context combinations that can arise as a result of being in urban or online transit.

The artist's curating of all three spaces appears designed to trigger and mash-up collective memories of contexts constructed for the purposes of performance. Hamilton acknowledges the white space of the gallery to be as rarefied a zone as the theatre or cinema set, and the cultural filter-effect of the performative sensibilities associated with each of them. In gallery one, blue is the colour that connects the artwork elements of a tangential narrative on body politics. Against a backdrop of film-industry 'blue-screen' paint, a series of sculptural works (balletic arrangements of MDF legs, domestic pipework and tabletop clutter) take one from (virtual) cinematic action to the suggestive art-production processes of Yves Klein's naked models; the *Hoerengracht* styling of lingerie shop windows to the social satire of *The Simpsons*.

If it weren't for the clinical, unhomely atmosphere of *Kabuki Chefs* in the final gallery, a studio set-cum-V&A-fashion-display of mannequins, clothing, food and kitchen equipment precisely arranged in clusters as if the props for a Kabuki performance, one could imagine a TV crew making daytime output in here. This is not accidental: Hamilton appears to embrace all aspects of human and object theatre, and the oddities that emerge as a result of their cross-pollination. Her uncanny knack for wringing the sensual out of odd combinations of objects and materials, like contemporaries Claire Barclay and Alice Channer, highlights both the simple pleasures and murkier aspects of consumption. This open-handed use of familiar signifiers in the gallery affords a moment to consider how every investigation is essentially a reinvestigation, but one that can exist in accordance with, rather than tied to, the past.

REBECCA GELDARD

Richard Hughes: *Where It All Happened Once*
Tramway, Glasgow
26 October – 16 December

In his 1997 book *Mind Invaders*, Stewart Home wrote of the way in which urban landscapes could be emotionally remapped as 'rebels and bohemians traverse cities, scattering signs, staging enigmas, leaving coded messages, usurping the territorial claims of priests and kings by transforming the social perception of specific urban sites'. Richard Hughes's work operates in a similar fashion, bringing these signs, messages and transformations into the gallery space in monumental sculptural installations that neither celebrate nor condemn the dross-scapes and wastelands of British towns and cities.

The failure of modernist ideals, depictions of abandoned, rundown architecture and the appropriation of modernist design are well-worn, even hackneyed themes in art of the last 15 years or so. In theory and academia, too, these subjects continue to demand seemingly endless attention. Perhaps this is a reflection of 'the state we are in', a collective memory of the recent past that now seems comparatively less austere or grim than it did. Unlike some of his contemporaries, however, Hughes avoids the obvious 'mourning and melancholy' handling of these tropes by presenting a more nuanced, conflicted nostalgia for his teenage playgrounds. If anything, like Robert Smithson's photographic/map artwork *Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967), Hughes offers us a kind of skewed Ozymandias complex here, a cut-price version of 'ruin value'. The scale of his work alone brings with it a sense of absurdity and playfulness that mitigates against reading these sculptures as purely 'gritty' or 'realist'. *Community Fun Day* (2012), for example, is the gargantuan centrepiece of the exhibition, a scaled-down replica of a boarded-up, decaying community centre modelled on an existing early-1980s building. The entire mockup tilts on its side, as if it has been dropped carelessly into the space, or hurled across the city by a giant baby throwing toys out of a pram. The title, too, is as ironic as David Shrigley's *Leisure Centre* (1992), a photograph of a small cardboard box dumped in the middle of wasteland with the words 'Leisure Centre' written on it. Likewise, the most fun we can imagine at *Community Fun Day* would undoubtedly take place behind the building, rather than within it.

The wit and humour of Hughes's work relies, to some extent, on an experiential understanding of such spaces, and the works aid this kind of associative response. The ability to laugh, even in the midst of our horror, at urban entropy and to use it to recall personal narratives is part of a broader, more sober reflection on the shortsighted and/or oppressive sociopolitical ideologies that gave rise to such 'projects'. The anthropomorphism of objects such as *The Pedestrian* (2012), a cast of lamp-posts that appear to have come to life as a pair of running legs, or the deflated football fashioned into a sinister skull atop the sculpture *If socks aren't pulled up heads will roll* (2009), reinforce the surreal, defamiliarised or mythic properties we often ascribe to found or abandoned objects encountered or stumbled across in 'edgelands', as we wander, play or get lost on home turf.

SUSANNAH THOMPSON

Danh Vo

Danh Vo: *Uterus*
Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago
23 September – 16 December

It takes some moxie for a male artist to name his exhibition *Uterus* and an even stronger vision to carry it off as an artistic gesture. Danh Vo certainly has the former, and this show, a meditation on identity, history, family and sexuality, comes close to proving he has the latter.

Physically and metaphorically, the installation suggests the female reproductive organs. You enter through a narrow corridor constructed by the artist. Beyond is a single large gallery. The passage is hung with letters from Henry Kissinger – dating from his time as Nixon's Secretary of State – to *New York Post* correspondent Leonard Lyons thanking him for tickets to the theatre and ballet. Kissinger is evidently enthusiastic, but often busy: in one note he begs off because he is 'contemplating Cambodia'.

Vo, who was born in Vietnam in 1975 and whose family fled the country four years later, has often used documents to construct oblique self-portraits and to refer to the alienation he feels as a result of his displacement. Here the letters allude to his personal history. They also create a tension between Kissinger's leisure activities and the war, linking creativity and aggression, the twin determinants of Vo's identity as an artist.

The works in the large gallery articulate a more intimate process of becoming oneself. Arranged in rough order from head to toe are: a silicone cast of Vo's mother's mouth titled *Mother Tongue, Fatherland* (2012); a letter about a statue of St Joseph that the artist has used in previous pieces; a nineteenth-century print of a bridle that resembles a pelvis; and a cast of the artist's boyfriend's feet. These are relics, and a wishbone and a sprig of blonde hair from a ten-year-old girl placed among them heighten their fetishistic quality. Beautiful and creepy, they communicate longing for the absent, or in the case of the hair, which Vo described in a talk as an ideal of European beauty, to be other than one is. Together they form a portrait of the artist through a charged mix of lust and Oedipal urges.

They also represent the artist and his subject torn to tatters. Nearby, Vo piles fragments of earlier sculptures, and across the room sits a collection of rusty animal traps that suggest the need to capture, control and destroy. As in the Kissinger letters, pleasure and longing pair with power and violence.

But the traps and fragments read as space-fillers. Their thematic connection to the other pieces seems crude. The installation lacks a deeply articulated theme, like the current of homoeroticism that unified *Autoerotic Asphyxiation*, Vo's installation at Artists Space in 2010. Without such a theme, the disconnects in *Uterus* leave the viewer with the frustrating need for more. The feeling might be appropriate given the absence that haunts Vo's work, but the show itself is too desultory to link the response back to the work effectively.

JOSHUA MACK

Kiki Kogelnik

Kiki Kogelnik: *Early Works, 1964–1970*
Simone Subal Gallery, New York
9 September – 4 November

1961: Lem's *Solaris*; 1962: Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*; 1963: Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*; 1965: Herbert's *Dune*; 1966: Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*; 1967: Zelazny's *Lord of Light*; 1968: Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*; 1969: Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*...

The 1960s were a golden age for science fiction, though as the list above would indicate, it was a bit more golden for men than for women. Le Guin was, and is, the rare pathbreaker, in literature and in thought. *The Left Hand of Darkness* was not feminist SF. It did, and does, what we expect of all great literature, and that's to pry our minds free of convention. That Le Guin did this via the invention of an androgyne race won it the feminist label, but we can see now that it was an early stab at the kind of hybridity that Donna Haraway would flesh out 15 years later.

Kiki Kogelnik (who passed away in 1997) deserves a big place in this discussion. An émigré on the run from Vienna at the moment, in 1964, when Actionism set up its mud-and-blood-wrestling matches as vehicles of sociosexual liberation, Kogelnik took up in New York and quickly fell in with the Pop set – primarily Lichtenstein, and Oldenburg, whose early love for goopy objects echoed the Actionists' love of bodily fluids. But the image reigned in New York, and so Kogelnik's images, of bodies mostly, were rendered flat and graphic, yet always still with an inside, and always as something more or less human.

Using medical stamps of heads (in profile, or head-on with chins raised to emphasise the throat), legs and women's torsos, and silhouettes of figures made from spraypainting over the edges of cutouts, Kogelnik, like Warhol, mechanised and automated the otherwise authorial, indexical trace. If Warhol wanted to be a machine, Kogelnik wanted to be a robot, a different kind of incorporation entirely. Her works on paper, such as *Robots* (1966) or *Untitled (Robots)* (c. 1967), show cut-and-quartered bodies getting wired together as if coming off an outer world assembly line. The paintings *Outer Space* (1964) and *Atmospheric Drag on Satellite* (1965) show what the dream life of such beings might be.

Kogelnik's greatest affinity might be with Paul Thek, whose *Technological Reliquaries* from the mid-1960s exhibit similar obsessions with impossible bodily hybridities and a kind of cyborg mindedness. But Kogelnik's work is less disaster-laden, less anxiety-ridden and allegorical with regard to sexuality. The figure in *The Human Touch* (c. 1965), whose head is disjointed from its body and perfectly circular, is ecstatic, a secular St Teresa for our robotic age – it's a label that could apply to Kogelnik as well.

JONATHAN T.D. NEIL